

Style

Story behind image of dead Palestinian baby highlights photographer challenges

By **Paul Farhi** March 12, 2013

It was surely one of the most heart-wrenching — and controversial — news photos of the past year, and maybe many years.

The image of a Palestinian man, his head thrown back in grief as he cradled the shrouded body of his infant son, set off a fierce war of words between Israeli and Palestinian factions when newspapers and Web sites published it in November. Palestinian supporters saw the photo, taken by an Associated Press photographer, as evidence of the Israeli military's aggression against Palestinian civilians; Israel's supporters viewed it as a carefully orchestrated bit of propaganda designed to engender sympathy for Palestinians during the brief Gaza-Israeli conflict.

It turns out that it was quite likely neither one. The story behind the photograph suggests the continuing challenges journalists face in sorting out truth and fiction amid the chaos of a war zone, especially one in the Middle East.

Nearly four months after the image was circulated worldwide, a U.N. commission has concluded that Israel was not directly responsible for the child's death. The baby apparently was killed by a Palestinian rocket that fell on his family's house in Gaza, it said. The rocket, fired by militants in Gaza, was one of hundreds aimed at Israelis during the eight-day conflict.

The one-line conclusion by the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights was a surprise twist in the photo's emotion-laden history. The photo evoked such a strong reaction that it became a lightning rod for perceptions about the hostilities.

Many readers were outraged that the image was featured prominently in The Washington Post, which played it across four columns atop its front page on Nov. 15. Some asked why the paper didn't treat similarly photos of Israelis huddled in shelters to escape Palestinian rocket fire.

The Post's caption on the photo said the child died "after an Israeli airstrike in Gaza City," which implied Israeli culpability. In light of the U.N. report, the paper said it would publish an editor's note in Wednesday's editions along with the photo that clarifies the circumstances surrounding it. The note reads, in part, that the U.N. report "has now cast doubt" on Israel's involvement.

The Associated Press on Tuesday issued a correction for its caption for the photo. It wrote, "An errant Palestinian rocket, not an Israeli airstrike, likely killed the child during fighting in the Hamas-ruled territory last November, a U.N. report indicated,

challenging the widely believed story behind the image which became a symbol of what Palestinians said was Israeli aggression.”

The episode suggests “the fog of war and the fog of journalism” during a war, said Ken Light, a professor who oversees the photojournalism program at the University of California at Berkeley’s Graduate School of Journalism. News photographers are usually diligent about ensuring that they’ve placed their images in the proper context, he said, but in the middle of armed conflict, “a lot can get through the cracks. . . . A picture is worth a thousand words, but you don’t always know the circumstances that led up to making the picture.”

Michael Oren, Israel’s ambassador to the United States, said the issue is further complicated by Hamas and Hezbollah, the Islamist groups that oppose Israel in Gaza and southern Lebanon, respectively.

“You have to understand that the media is as much of a battlefield for them as anything going on” on the ground, he said. “You are dealing with terrorist organizations that will exploit and manipulate the media. They know how the Western press works and how to use it to their advantage.”

Both organizations, Oren said, use civilian deaths to turn public opinion against Israel, even if those deaths occur under ambiguous circumstances. This should make any news organization wary about attributing particular casualties.

The photo would not have been as newsworthy to Western media organizations if the caption had said it was unclear how the baby had died, said Eric Rozenman, Washington director for the [Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America](#) (CAMERA), a watchdog group. That’s because the image played into preconceived notions about Israel’s military might.

The lesson for the news media is to use caution in reporting on the Arab-Israeli conflict Rozenman said. “If you really didn’t know the circumstances for the information in a [caption], then it ought to have a flag on it” saying as much, he added.

After interviewing witnesses, the U.N. office concluded that the damage to the child’s Gaza home was inconsistent with an Israeli airstrike. It said that the infant was “killed by what appeared to be a Palestinian rocket.” A spokesman for the organization told the AP that he couldn’t “unequivocally” blame Palestinian sources, but an investigation showed that there had been Palestinian rocket fire near the child’s home at the time he was killed.

The child’s father was a journalist employed by the BBC.

Despite the finding, the Gaza-based Palestinian Center for Human Rights said it still holds Israel responsible for the baby’s death, according to the AP.

 **639 Comments**

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